

# **The 2008 Strong Start<sup>®</sup> Program Evaluation**

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## Executive Summary

The Strong Start® Letters, Sounds and Words program is a volunteer-driven pre-reading program currently operating in schools in the Catholic and Public systems in Waterloo region. The program aims to provide attention to those children who need assistance. Strong Start® is a nonprofit community organization and runs the program in partnership with both school systems. The program is a 10-week experience for 5-7 year-old children. It uses short games and activities to provide repetition to help young children recognize letters, a sound each one represents, how to learn words by sight and how to learn a word by using the sounds of its letters. Volunteer coaches work with one child at a time and follow prescribed activities using the materials provided. The program and the volunteer training sessions have been designed to allow volunteers to be very independent in running the program over the 10 weeks.

The 2008 Strong Start® program evaluation was designed to learn about the program's effects on children, volunteers and site coordinators. The evaluation also sought to assess implementation fidelity to the program design. Additionally, the evaluation aimed to better understand the elements and processes of the program and host organization that facilitate positive outcomes. The purpose of the evaluation was to attempt to prove the effectiveness of the program and to generate knowledge that could offer ideas for learning and program improvement. This executive summary highlights the findings from the evaluation.

## Approach

The Strong Start® evaluation was coordinated by Dr. Scot Evans from Wilrid Laurier University and was assisted by Adele Gawley, Natalie Brown, Sonja Brubacher, Dr. Alexandra Gottardo, and numerous research assistants. Data were collected during the winter session 2008. Data collection included:

- Pre- and post-test measures with 121 participants in coaching sessions (children);
- Videotaped observation of 18 coaching sessions (volunteers & children);
- Post-training and end-of-service questionnaires with 419 volunteer coaches and 107 site coordinators; and,
- Interviews and focus groups with trainers (10), staff (2), and members of the finance committee and board of trustees.

## Brief Summary of Findings

The full report that follows and the accompanying appendices provide rich detail about the findings related to each component of the Strong Start® program. Here, we offer a brief summary of findings related to our specific evaluation questions. We turn the questions into statements related to program goals and theory of change and summarize the findings in each area.

### *The program makes a difference in children's' pre-reading skills*

The Strong Start® program makes a difference in the lives of children identified as being at-risk for reading difficulties. We examined the effectiveness of each of the Strong Start® strands, and found that children who received a strand outperformed children who did not receive the strand, on relevant measures. Additionally, we found that the assessment tools used by Strong Start® coordinators and volunteers obtain results that match those of widely accepted tools of reading assessment. Thus, program measures are accurate assessments of "gains" made by children.

### *The volunteers in the program are having a meaningful volunteer experience*

Findings in this area suggest overwhelmingly that volunteers are having a meaningful experience. 96% of volunteers who responded to the post-service questionnaire agreed or strongly agreed that

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their *volunteer experience was enjoyable and meaningful*. Responses to related open-ended questions provide further evidence of volunteers' level of satisfaction with the program.

### *The volunteers and site coordinators are well prepared to implement the program as designed*

As indicators for this outcome, we primarily looked at site coordinators' and volunteers' ability to correctly answer questions about the program after the training and at the end of the 10-week session. Most site-coordinators and volunteers were able to answer the post-training and post-service program knowledge questions with acceptable answers, and few areas where participants missed the mark. Some areas for improvement are outlined in the full report. Responses to the training satisfaction questions were generally positive for all training participants. Additionally, when reflecting on their experience after the 10 weeks, 84.1% of site coordinators and 88.1% of volunteers felt that *the training adequately prepared them for their role*.

### *Volunteers and site coordinators implement the program as designed*

This was the most difficult program component to get an accurate assessment of through this evaluation. Generally, we found that site coordinators were able to accurately classify children into the proper strands. Qualitative feedback from volunteers and site coordinators indicate areas for improvement in implementation of program policies and procedures. In our videotaped observations of volunteer sessions, all but one volunteer altered or modified the manual instructions somewhat during their session. Although on the surface this may raise concerns, on closer inspection, many of the instructions that were not implemented appear to be superficial aspects of the activities and most likely did not jeopardize the success of the session. Some degree of inaccurate responses to the "categorization questions" and "knowledge questions" on the questionnaires does raise some concern that those who answered questions inappropriately may not be implementing some aspects of the program as designed. A more rigorous "fidelity" evaluation would be needed to answer this implementation question more convincingly.

### *Volunteers receive the training and support they need to implement the program as designed*

Volunteers were overwhelmingly satisfied with the training and felt that the training adequately prepared them for their coaching sessions. 92% felt that they received the support they needed, 94% said the manuals were easy to follow, 90% suggested that communication with site coordinators was good. In the open-ended responses, volunteers had many good things to say about the overall functioning of the program and offered some helpful suggestions for improvement.

### *Site coordinators receive the training and support they need to implement the program as designed*

Generally, site coordinators felt well prepared and supported. 94% said they received the ongoing support that they needed, 85% felt the manuals were easy to follow, and 91% said that the materials and information they needed were provided in a timely manner. 69% felt the tools provided to help with recruitment were helpful and 75% felt communication with volunteers was easy indicating some minor areas for improvement. In the open-ended responses, site coordinators had many good things to say about the overall functioning of the program and offered some helpful suggestions for improvement.

### *The Strong Start® program responds effectively to the needs and suggestions of schools and volunteers*

Again, 94% of site coordinators said they received the ongoing support that they needed, and 91% said that the materials and information they needed were provided in a timely manner demonstrating generally that the Strong Start® program responded to their needs. 69% felt the tools provided to help with recruitment were helpful. Volunteers also generally felt that their needs

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were met. Responses by key stakeholders to the interview and focus group questions indicate that the organization places a high priority on supporting site coordinators and schools. Trainers felt that their suggestions get heard and often implemented immediately.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

This comprehensive evaluation of the Strong Start® program shined light on all aspects of the program and organization. Taken together, this evaluation demonstrates that Strong Start® is a healthy and effective program with a solid organizational home. The findings provide substantial evidence that the Strong Start® program is achieving the outcomes they desire for children, volunteers, and site coordinators. The program develops well-prepared site coordinators and volunteers, makes a difference in the pre-reading skills of children, and provides a meaningful experience for volunteers. Furthermore, our findings suggest that even while mainly relying on a cadre of volunteers for implementation, most aspects of the program are being implemented as designed.

While Strong Start® leadership is in the best position to determine the implications of these findings for program development and change, we offer the following recommendations for consideration:

- Provide site coordinators and volunteers more opportunities for ongoing training and post-program reflection. This could possibly include:
  - A web-based forum that enables volunteers and site coordinators to seek support and answers from each other.
  - Allowing more experienced volunteers to observe coaching sessions of new volunteers to offer support and feedback.
- Update those site coordinators and volunteers who may not have been trained on the “Building Words” strand
- Allow new volunteers to “shadow” or observe more experienced volunteers before their first coaching session.
- Use the “knowledge questions” from the evaluation as a post-training self-check mechanism for site coordinators and volunteers. These could be administered towards the end of training and correct answers could be discussed
- Ensure that activities that are considered critical in each coaching session are clearly noted as such in the coaches’ manual and differentiated from those that are more flexible or simply optional.
- Consider delivering at least some coaching sessions in small groups of up to three children. The literature on small-group intervention has demonstrated that it is as effective as one-on-one instruction. The added benefits include reducing the number of volunteers needed in each school, increasing social interaction for the children, and increasing the possible number of children that can be served or delivering more strands to each child.

*Response from Strong Start: We are reluctant to recommend a group approach since it may be more challenging and less satisfying for volunteers.*

- Develop a clear leadership succession plan with specific timeline.